

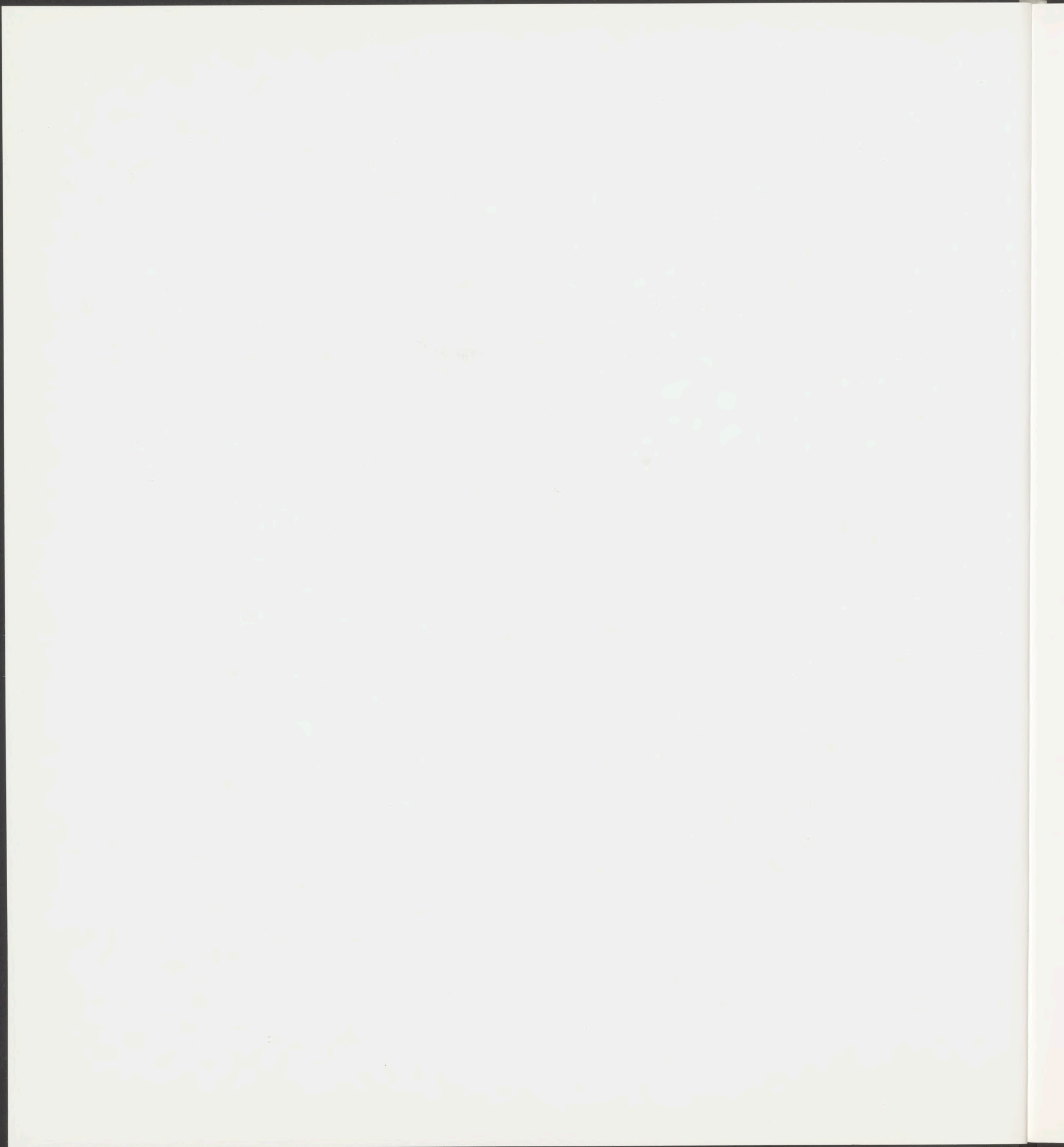
CHARLES PRATT



P H O T O G R A P H S







CHARLES PRATT
PHOTOGRAPHS



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Cover photograph: Roxbury ca. 1965

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Jane Livingston and John Gossage, curators of the
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Maine 1960

Now Charlie's message is beginning to be heard. To me, he gently tells me; I love the light coming up and when it goes down its not really all gone. There is light coming from somewhere. Charlie's work is like an echo you hear coming from the sky, the water, and the trees.

ROBERT FRANK



Roxbury 1964

I have never seen anybody photographing Nature with the sensitivity and purity that Charles Pratt's photographs have. He never becomes abstract, in the sense of giving the form of something the whole importance, and ignoring the life of it.

If you take the whole body of his work, there is an enormous growth away from the lyrical and romantic aspect of Nature—these leaves and all that—into strength, into the dramatic. In his last things he becomes infinitely more rooted in life, in the difficulties of life. He even printed differently. He is very very anxious to give through the lens of the camera the truth of what he sees and that is a strong position, it is a moral position, but there are, of course, great difficulties. The eye sees infinitely more than the negative does. If the eye sees twenty-five tones, the negative sees already only nineteen, and the print maybe twelve. At each stage there is a loss, and compromise.

What he worked for in the print was the utmost of what he had seen with his eyes. Especially the light. His photographs of trees and grasses and rocks have the purity of the child's vision that has not yet been corrupted or made unconfident by exposure to what is false and sterile. At the same time it is not naive. In photographing a chair he presents you with its outline and the material it is made of but also with the people who sat in it. At all times he remains within the limits of what he feels, what he responds to. His photographs have the nature of the thing being photographed, and they have his nature. You know, for instance, the cow. I have never seen a cow photographed that way. In this picture there is the nature of that cow that corresponds to the nature of Charles Pratt. The most elegant cow I've ever seen in my life and there is a tremendous connection.

The harmony and balance are not achieved by any kind of evasion—by not seeing what is there, or running away from reality. He had a gift for printing, from the beginning, but he was not a manipulator in the dark room. He was only always anxious to give what he saw. What distinguishes his work, apart from its beauty, is the extraordinary degree to which it is both sensitive and precise.

LISETTE MODEL

Charles Pratt carved out a small niche of his own in the arena of American art photography. What may at first appear in his photographs to be rather ordinary photographic qualities—sharp attention to detail, “picturesqueness,” a simple careful observance—are seen, with reflection, to constitute a remarkably distinctive and subtle and moving vision. Pratt’s way with the camera was always a bit tentative even in its apparent directness; he is saved from the banal or the sentimental by a genuine curiosity of nature, a true immersion in the qualities of the places he memorializes.

American photography, by the time Pratt got into it, was under the sway of a few powerful personalities, and thus a strong set of permissions. Stieglitz and Evans and Strand and Adams told photographers what they could do and what they could get away with. Pratt knew all of this, and proceeded both to respect and to ignore these strictures. It is significant that he actively resisted Eliot Porter, for it is primarily to Porter and to Paul Caponigro that he is inevitably compared. But Pratt is an artist whose relation to his subjects—particularly to the landscapes he photographed again and again—was somehow based not on any feel for the “picturesque,” but in a sense of literal *identification* with the natural earth, or with whatever it was he photographed.

Pratt saw the thing behind the thing. His photographic vision searched for what was intrinsic to a place, what might not essentially change over time despite the various impositions upon it. Much of the beauty in his imagery comes not from picturesqueness or any literal “sublime evocation of nature,” but from a character of odd straightforwardness and honesty and plainness. The slightly unexpected framings without a horizon line, or the undifferentiated all-over patterning of many of the color photographs, lend to Pratt’s nature photographs a quality of incipient abstraction. He often saw as a draughtsman sees; he often created rigorously uncompromising diagrammatic configurations. The more one looks at Pratt’s seemingly innocent and optimistic photographs, the more one discerns in them a vastly intelligent sensibility, an eye for structures and symmetries whose presence in the adventitiously given is seen as the great mystery of nature’s accretive patterns, and our conscious relation to them. *This* is what Pratt is photographing—the meanings and the inef-fabilities in the natural world and our irresistible impulse to understand or at least to experience these things.

JANE LIVINGSTON

Charlie was a photographer who had no interest in what was fashionable. He never let the fad of the moment push him one fraction of an inch from the path he wanted to follow. And that was to look for ways to express his own very personal vision of the world. All his pictures are a dialogue between himself and his subject, and no other voice intrudes.

Charlie's pictures are quiet. He didn't need to shout to make himself heard. He made his statements without bombast, with absolute honesty, with total concentration on whatever it was he wanted to say. He had deep respect for his subjects, and trusted them to stand up without tricky props of any kind. But one should not be misled by the quietness—he often felt there were powerful forces in the simple subject, if looked at with time, with sensitivity.

Charlie's pictures are full of joy. He photographed what he loved, not what he hated. This does not mean that he was unaware of the dark, troubled, violent aspects of our culture. He cared about these aspects, and as a person was active in trying to do something about them. But as a photographer he asserted the artist's right to deal with what most directly appealed to his temperament, and in these pictures, in spite of some dark and melancholy moods, what one senses most strongly is his joyful, vital, life-welcoming self, his embrace of the world.

But it is not enough that a photographer hold in his heart joy, vitality and embrace of the world, just as it is not enough that a violinist or a painter contain these feelings. The violinist must also know how to play the violin; the painter must own a hand which puts down what he sees and feels; and a photographer must be able to make his camera, his film, and his printing paper transmit not only nature but also his nature. It takes a peculiar kind of caring and effort to make the machinery and chemistry of photography convey feeling, and that is why whenever I talk to young photographers I like to use a story about Charlie Pratt.

He came one evening fifteen years ago to a photographic discussion group which I sort of ran. We were looking at a couple of dozen rather ratty photographs, which had been brought in by a pleasant week-end photographer, who boasted: "I knocked off these prints in just one evening."

I was horrified by the prints, by the idea of two dozen in an evening, but mostly by the sacrilegious 'knocked off.' I was afraid of what might slip off my sometimes acid tongue, so I said: "Charlie, why don't you tell us how you go about making a print."

Rather shyly he told the group that he would take half to a full day

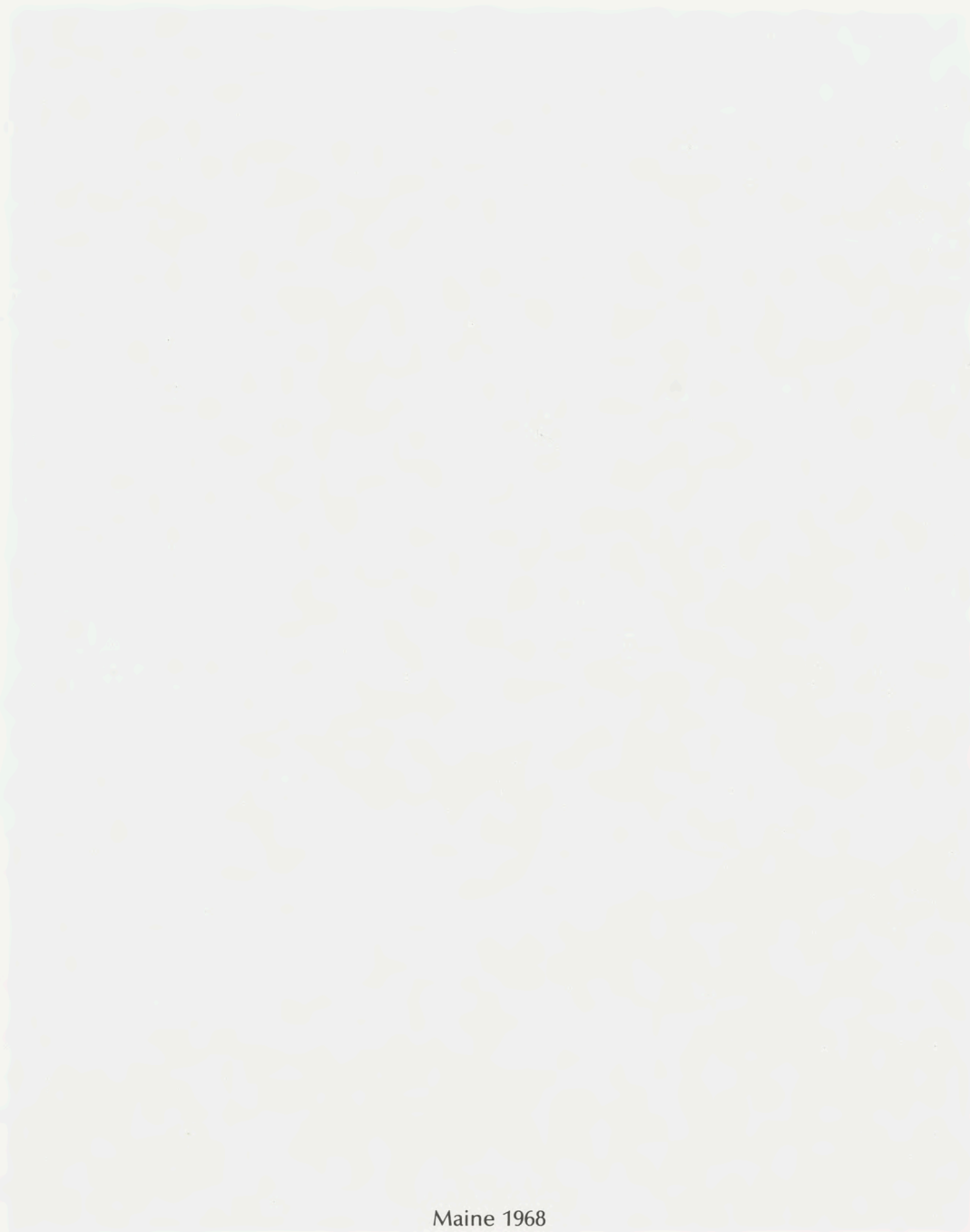
to make from four to six rather good proof enlargements from one or at the most two negatives. He told the group that he would mount them all, and stand them up on a railing in his workroom, and would look at them for a month or so. Then he exploded into his normal, earth-shaking laugh, and said: "I don't mean that I stand in front of them for a month. I leave them up for a month, stop to look at them some time each day to see how I feel. One day an idea will hit me how I want to print them, and I'll really go to work. Then I'll spend time on them." That was Charlie.

RALPH STEINER

P H O T O G R A P H S

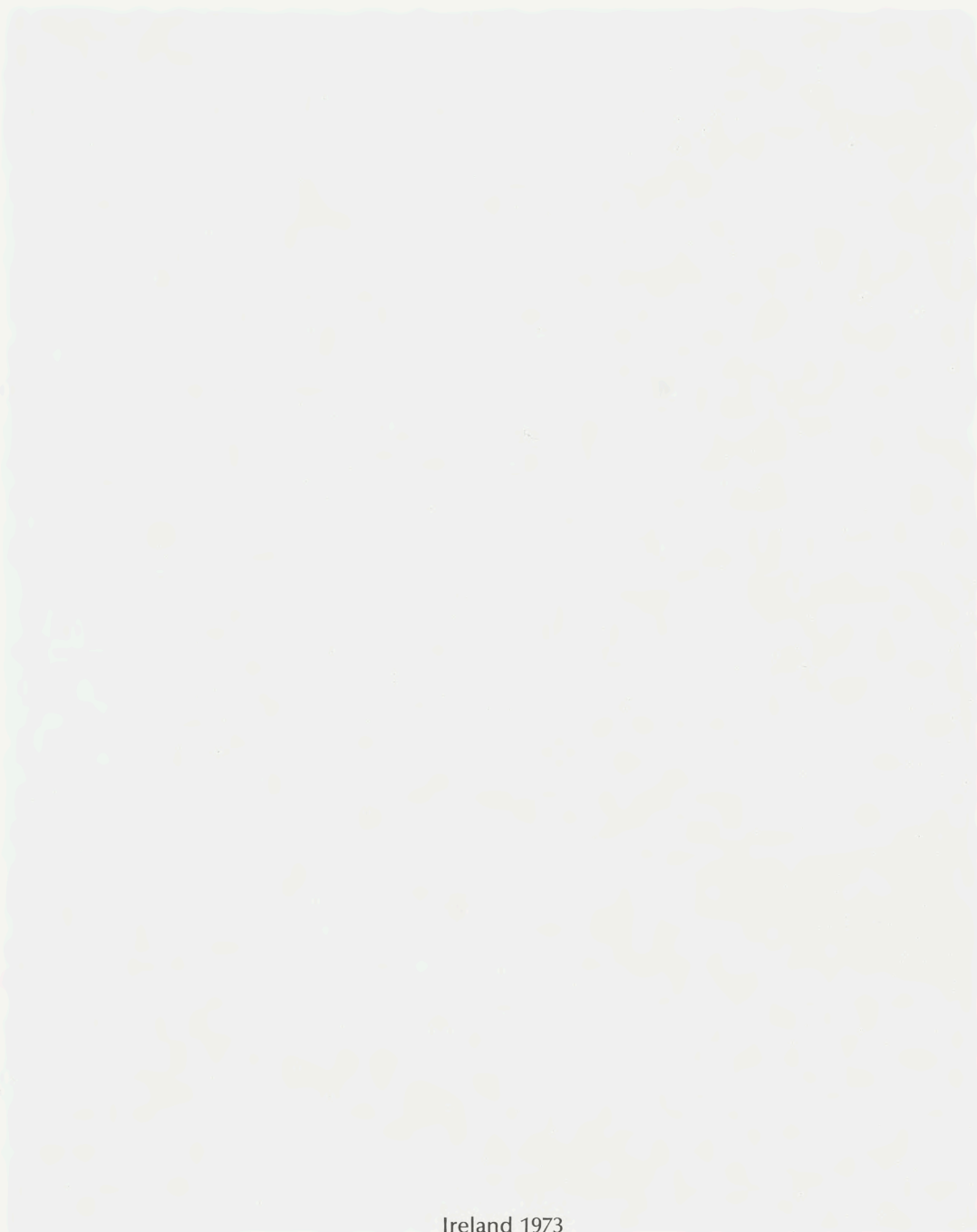
Greece 1975





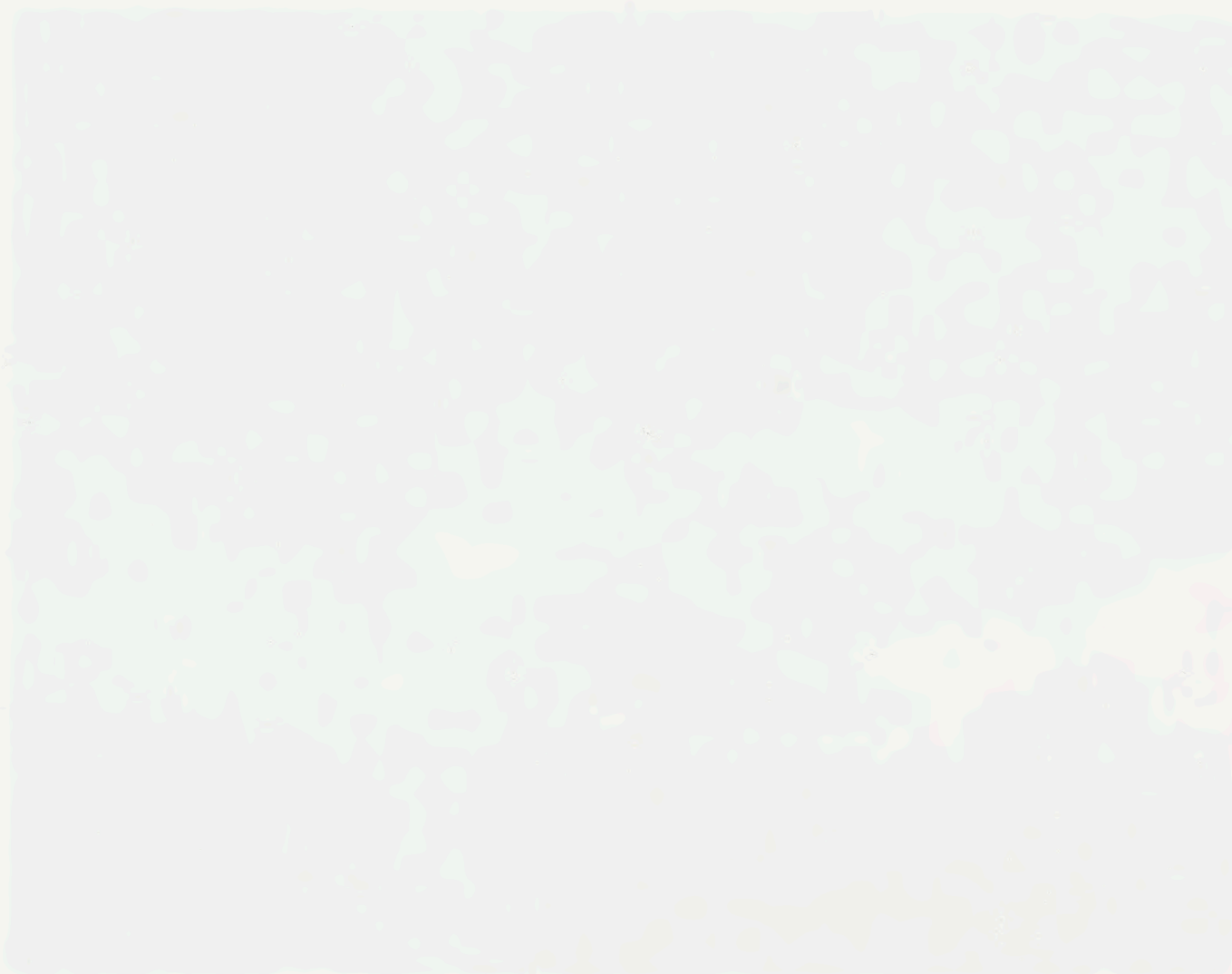
Maine 1968





Ireland 1973





Maine 1968



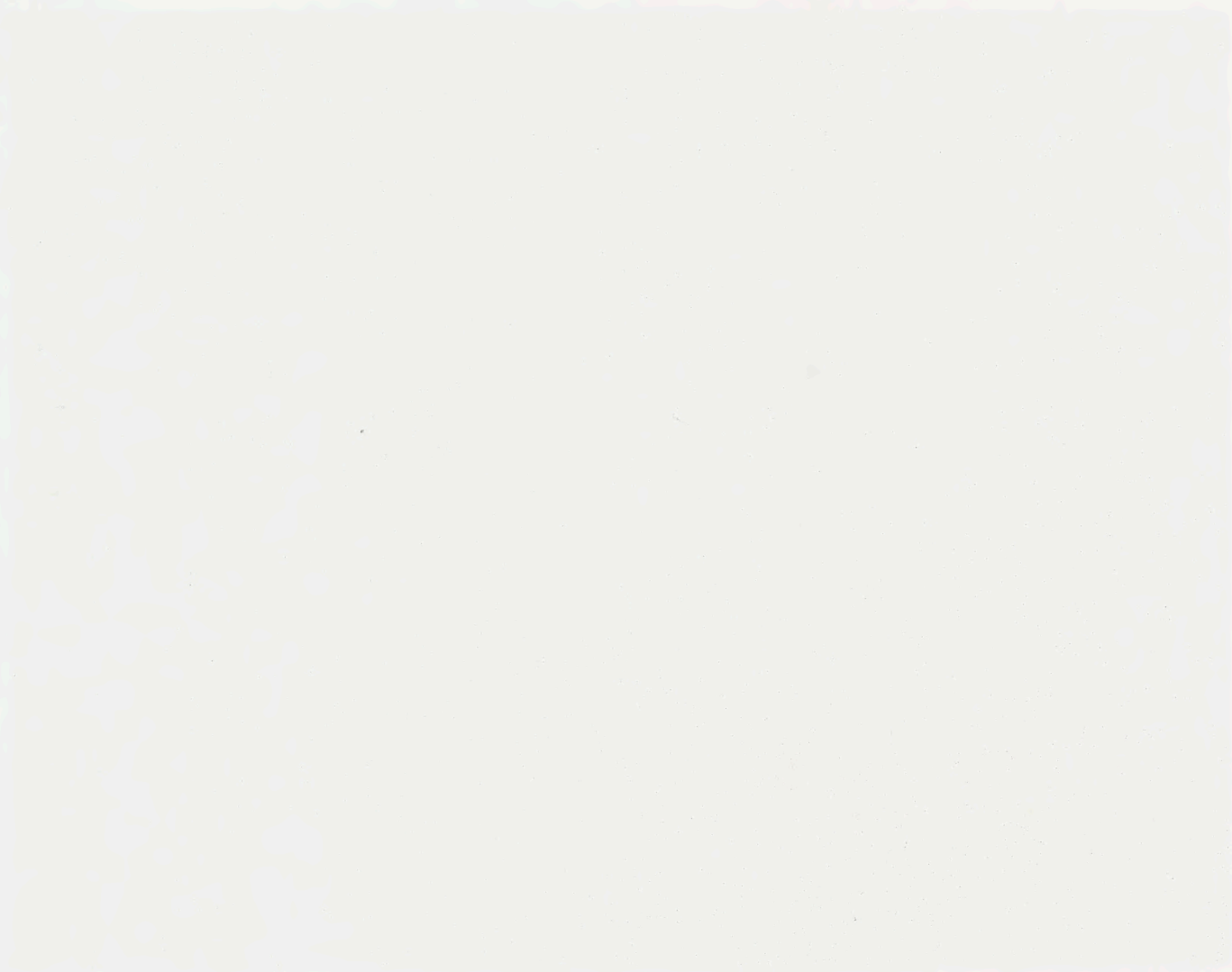


Roxbury 1967



Roxbury ca. 1965



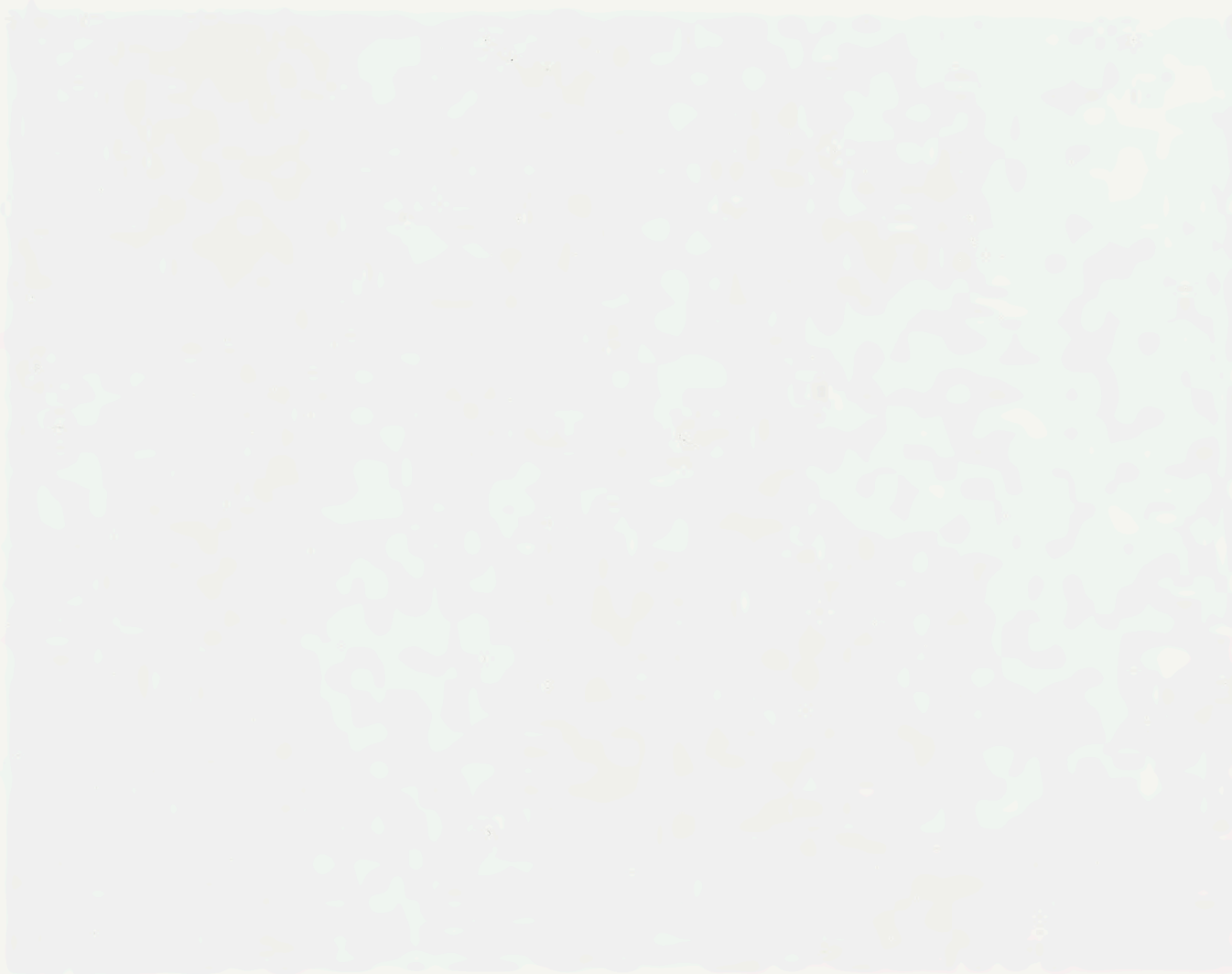


Isle au Haut 1971



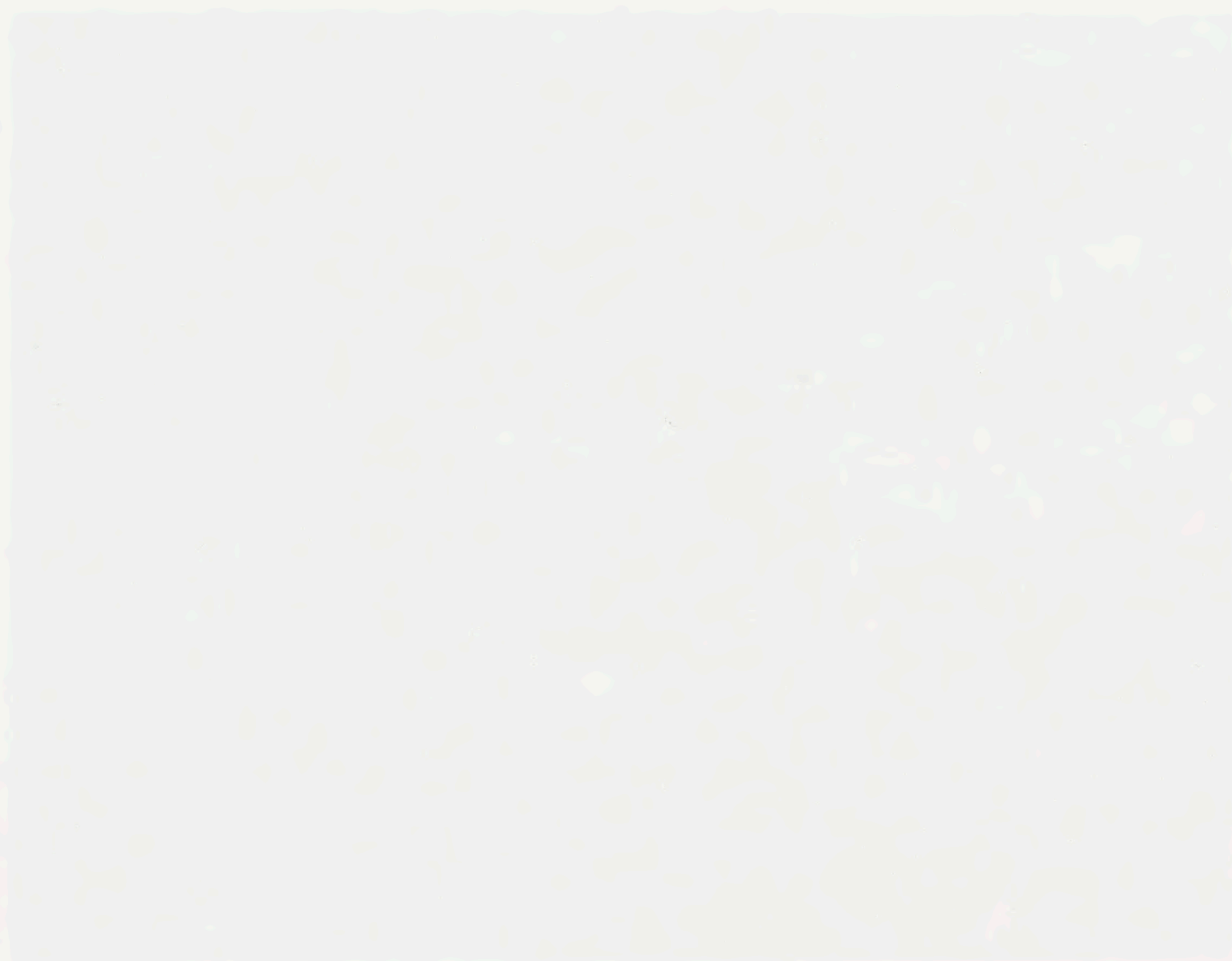
Ungava 1967





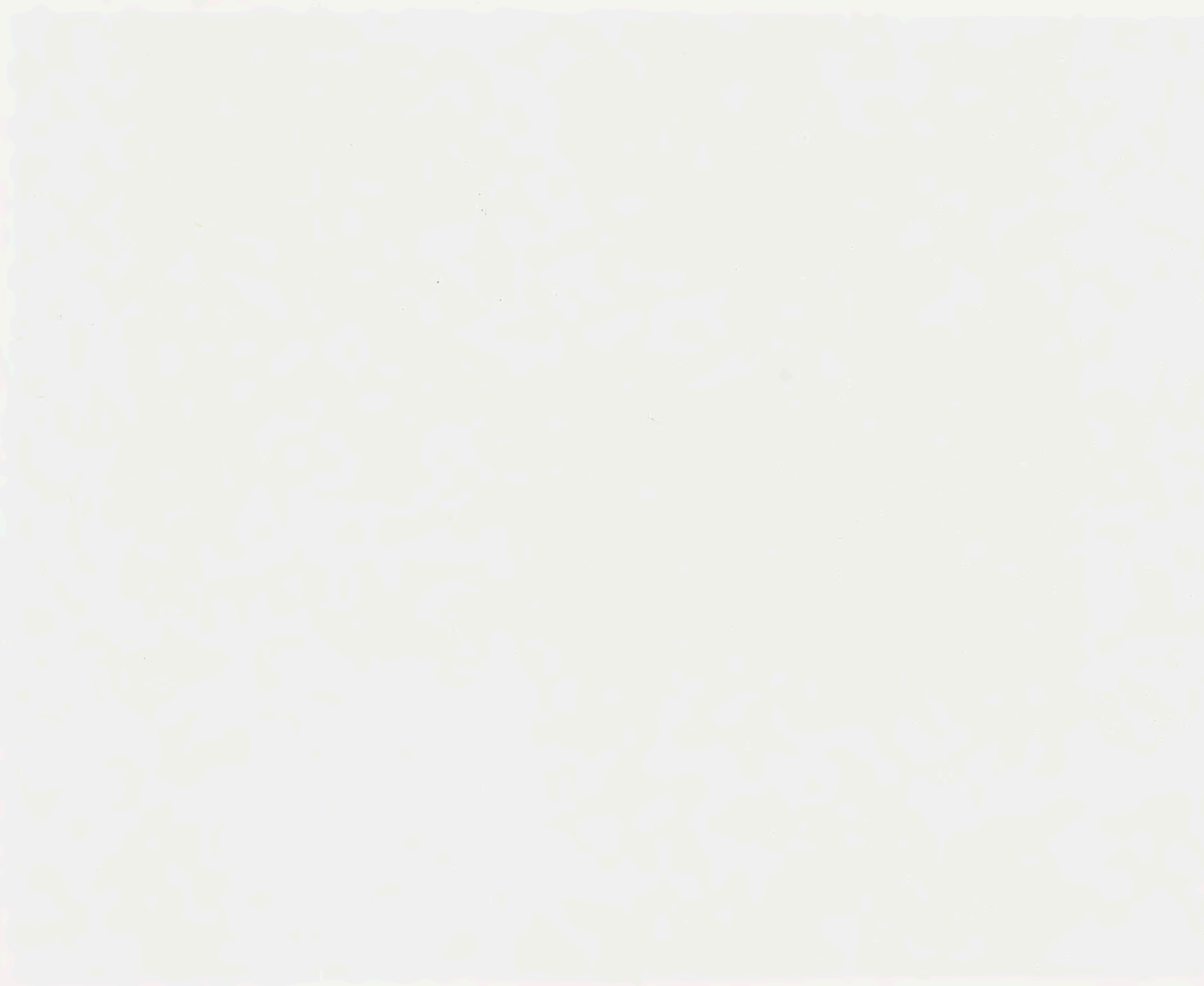
Maine 1967





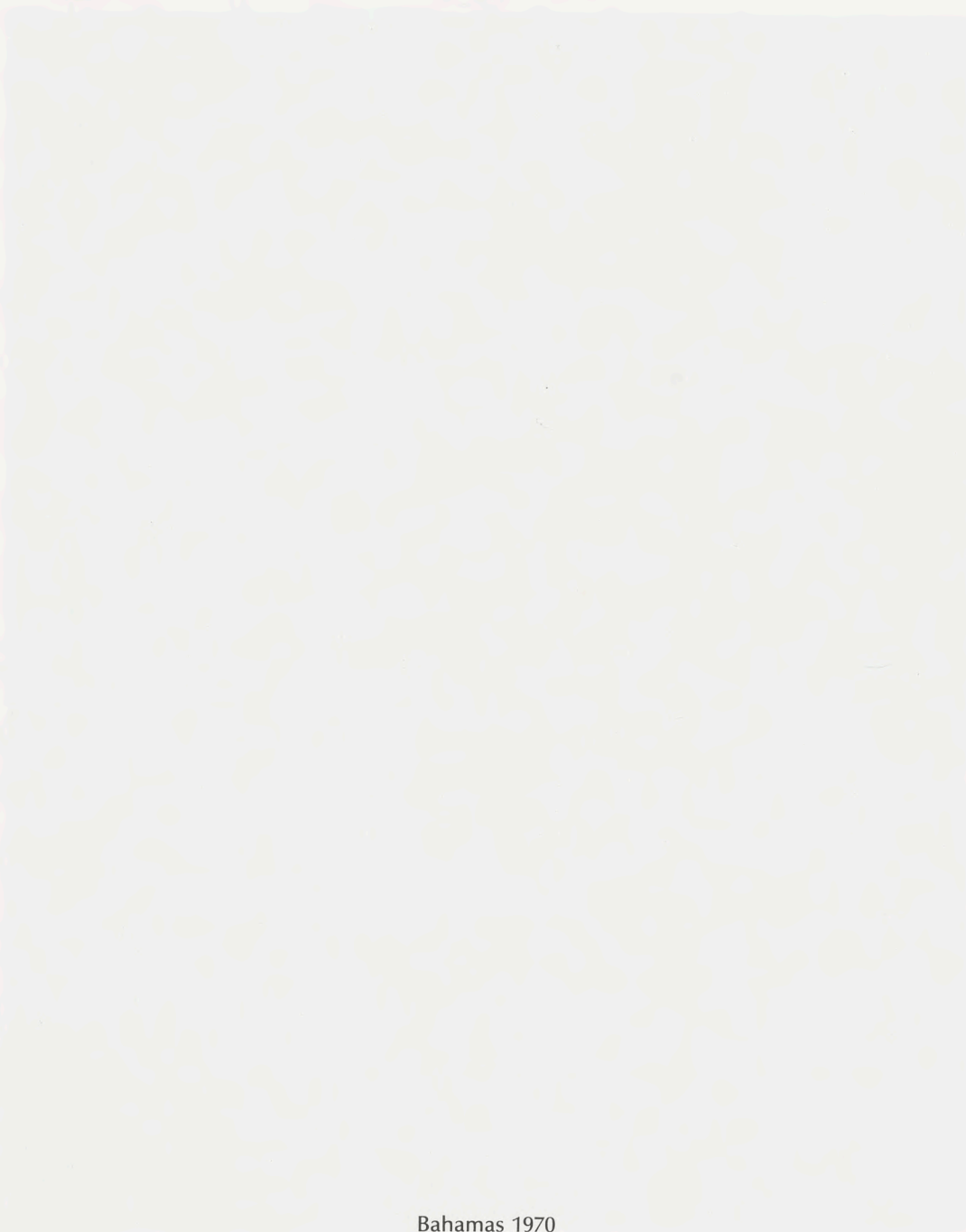
Roxbury 1967



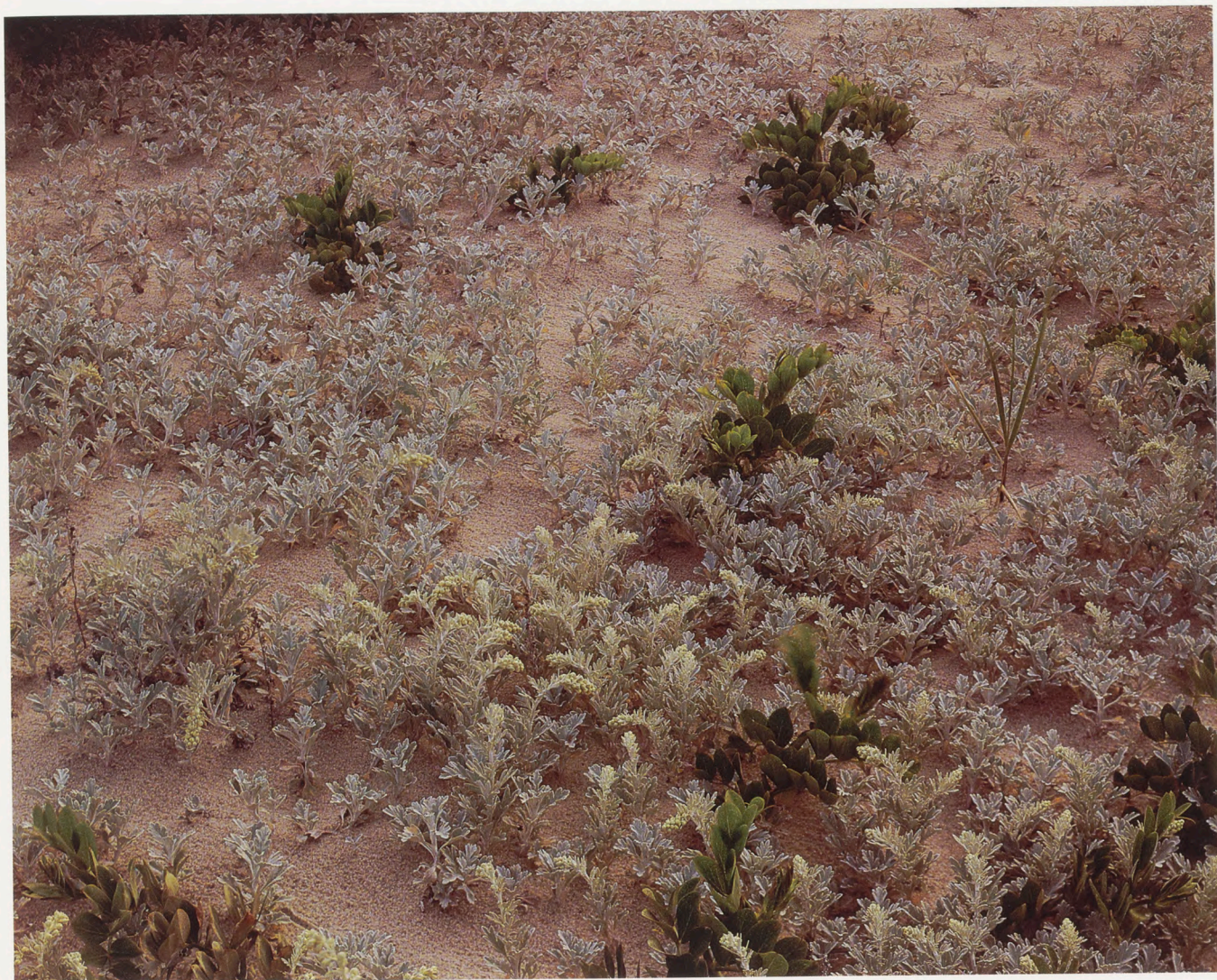


Maine 1965





Bahamas 1970





Maine 1968



Location Unknown ca. 1965



Ireland 1973





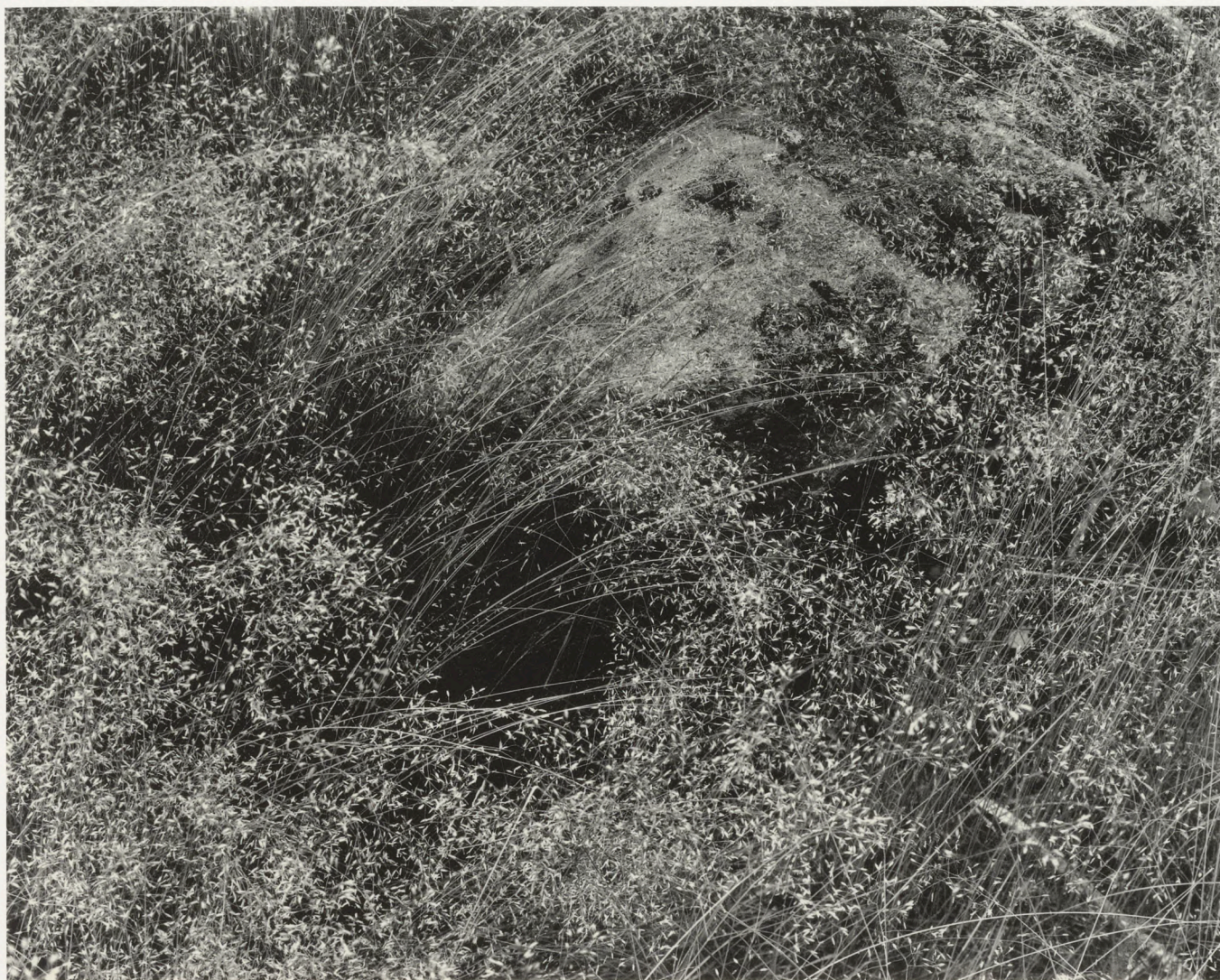
Maine 1964



Roxbury 1971

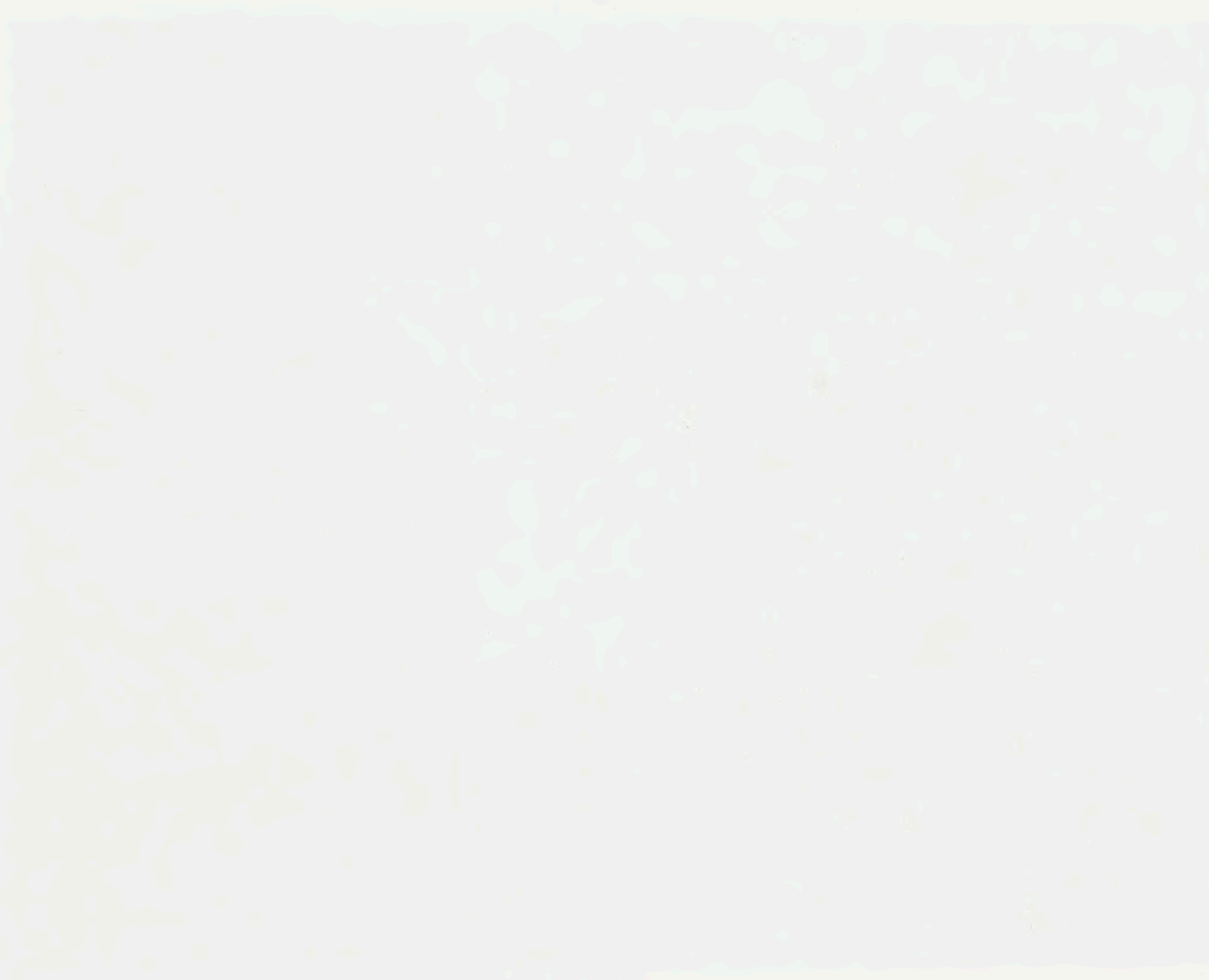


Maine 1965

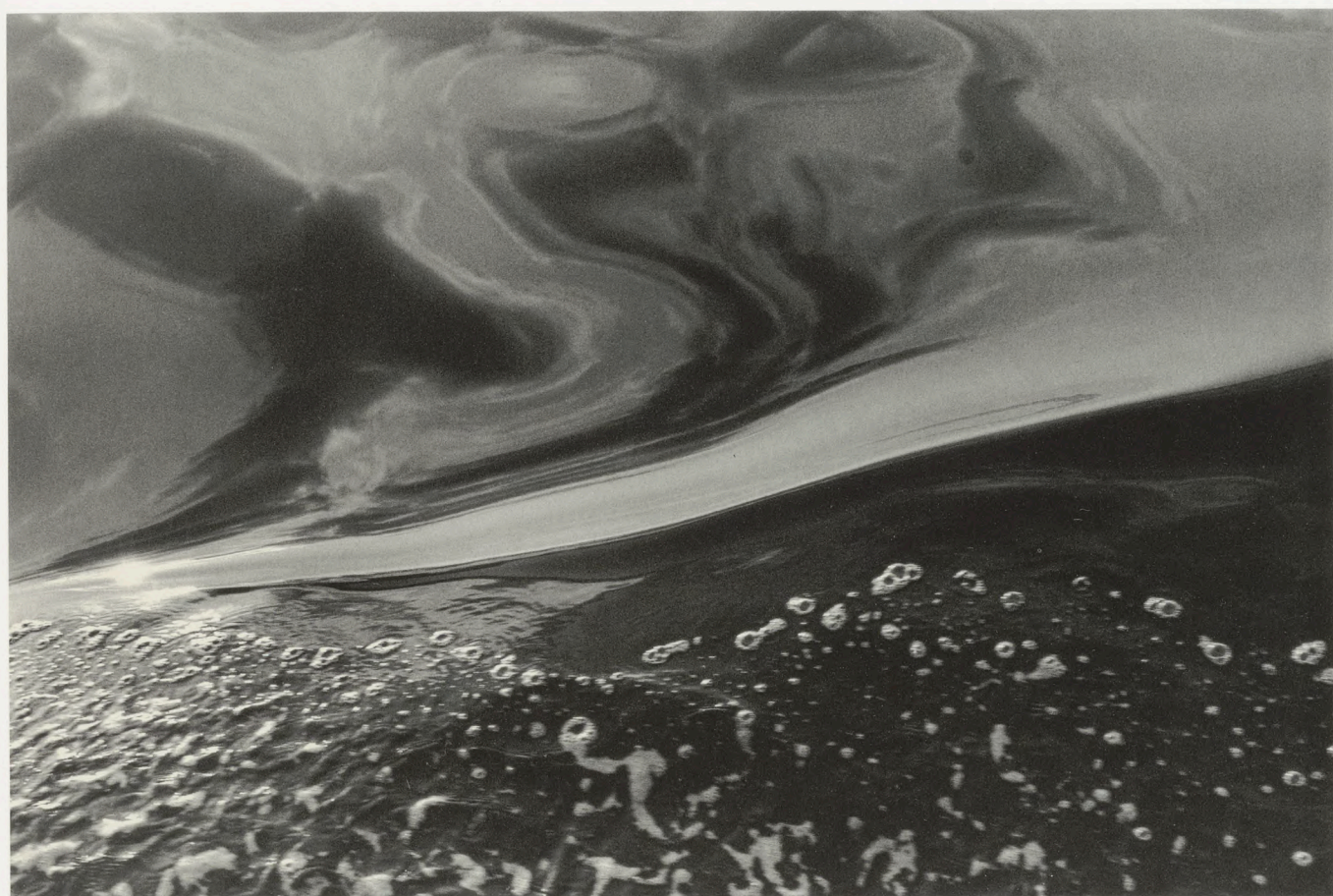


Maine 1968





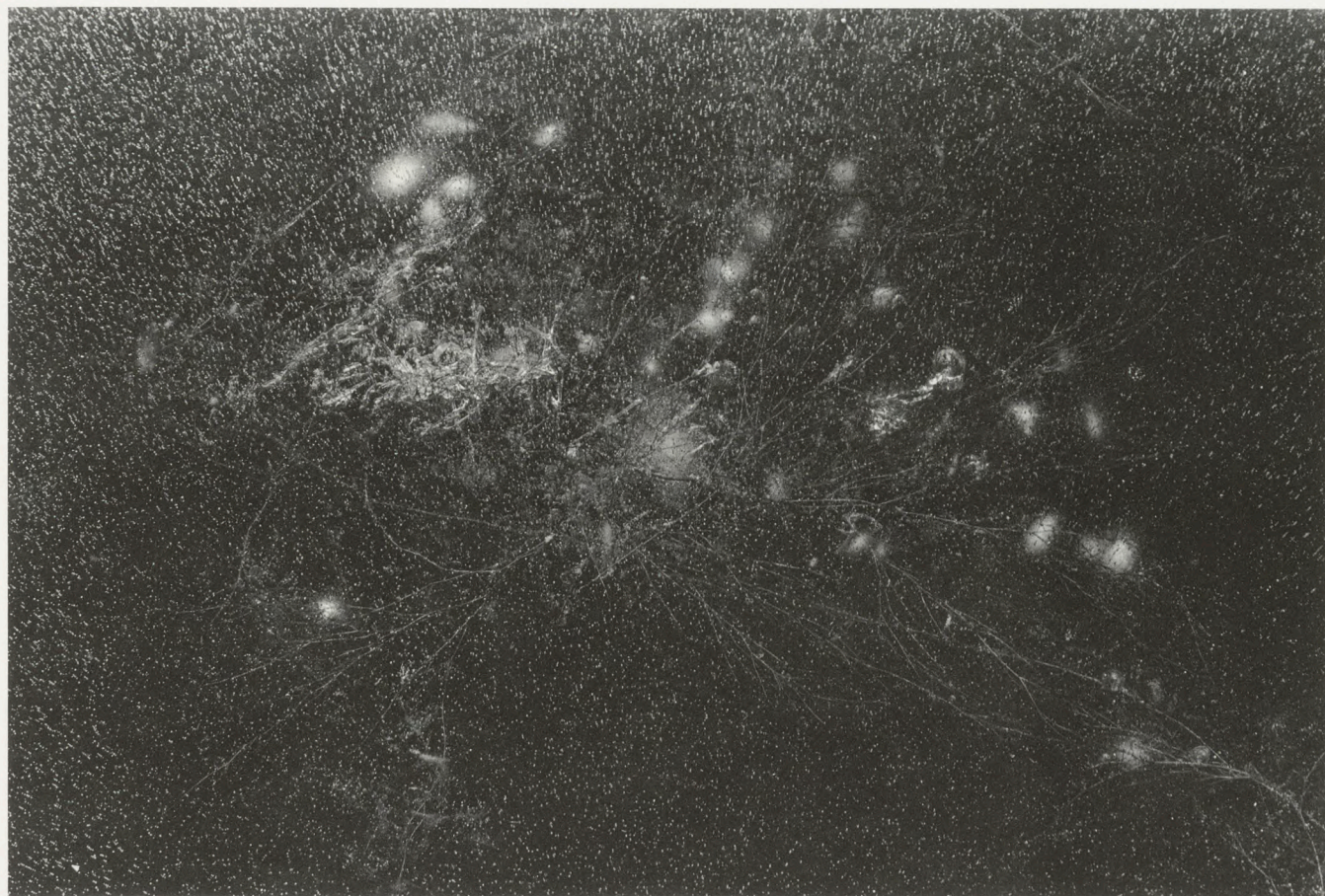
Blue Hill Bay, Maine 1965

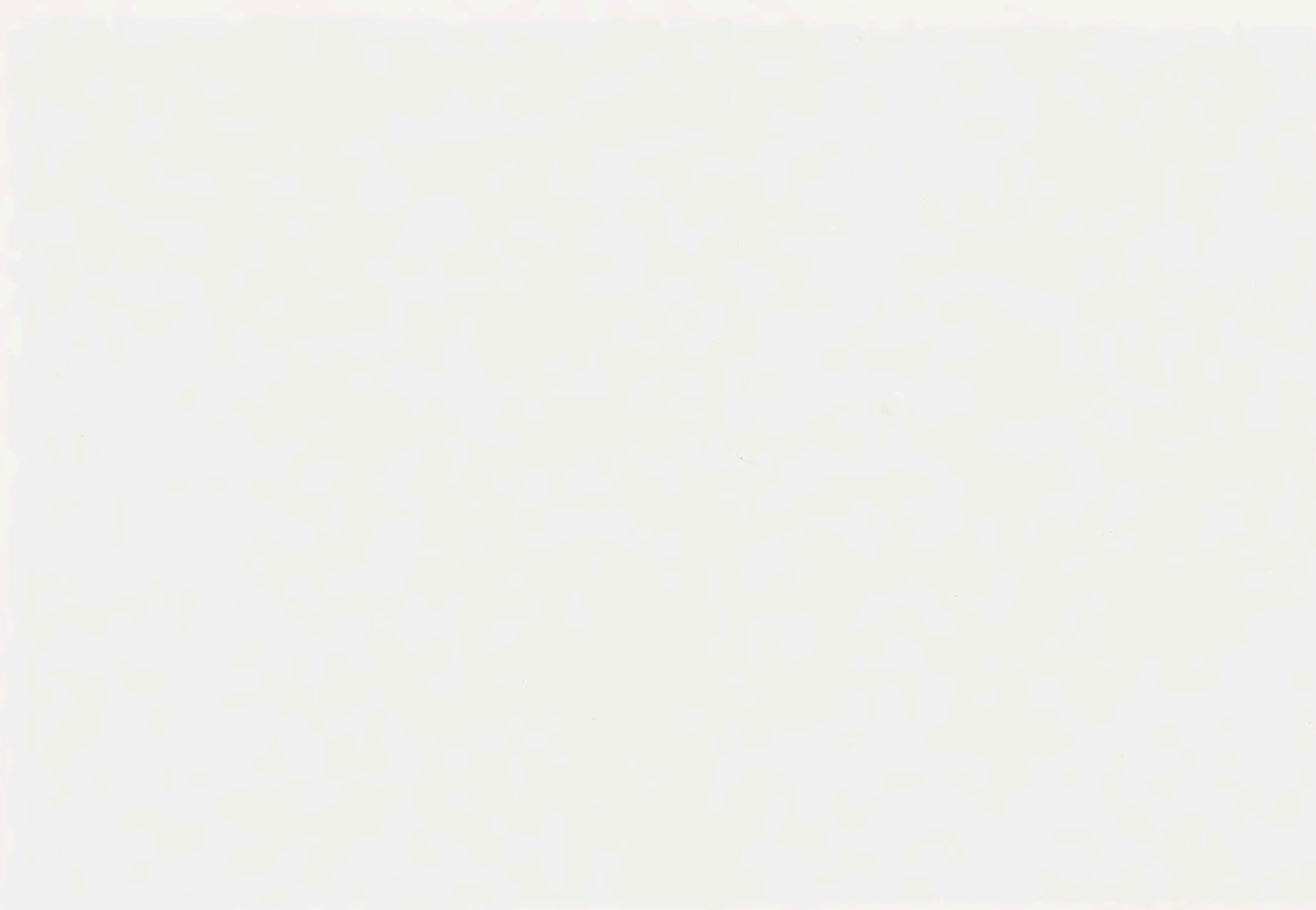


Maine 1963



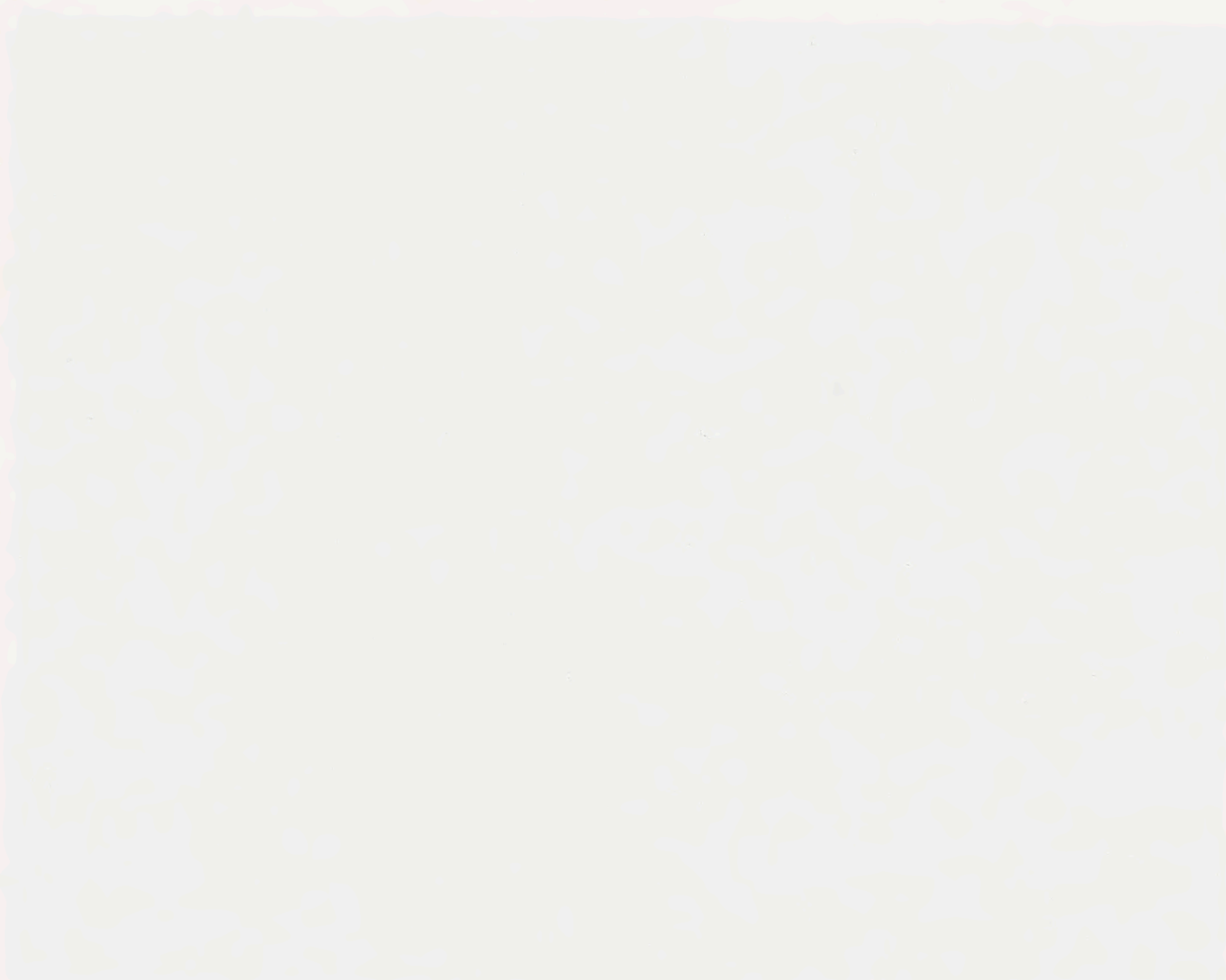
Roxbury 1969-70





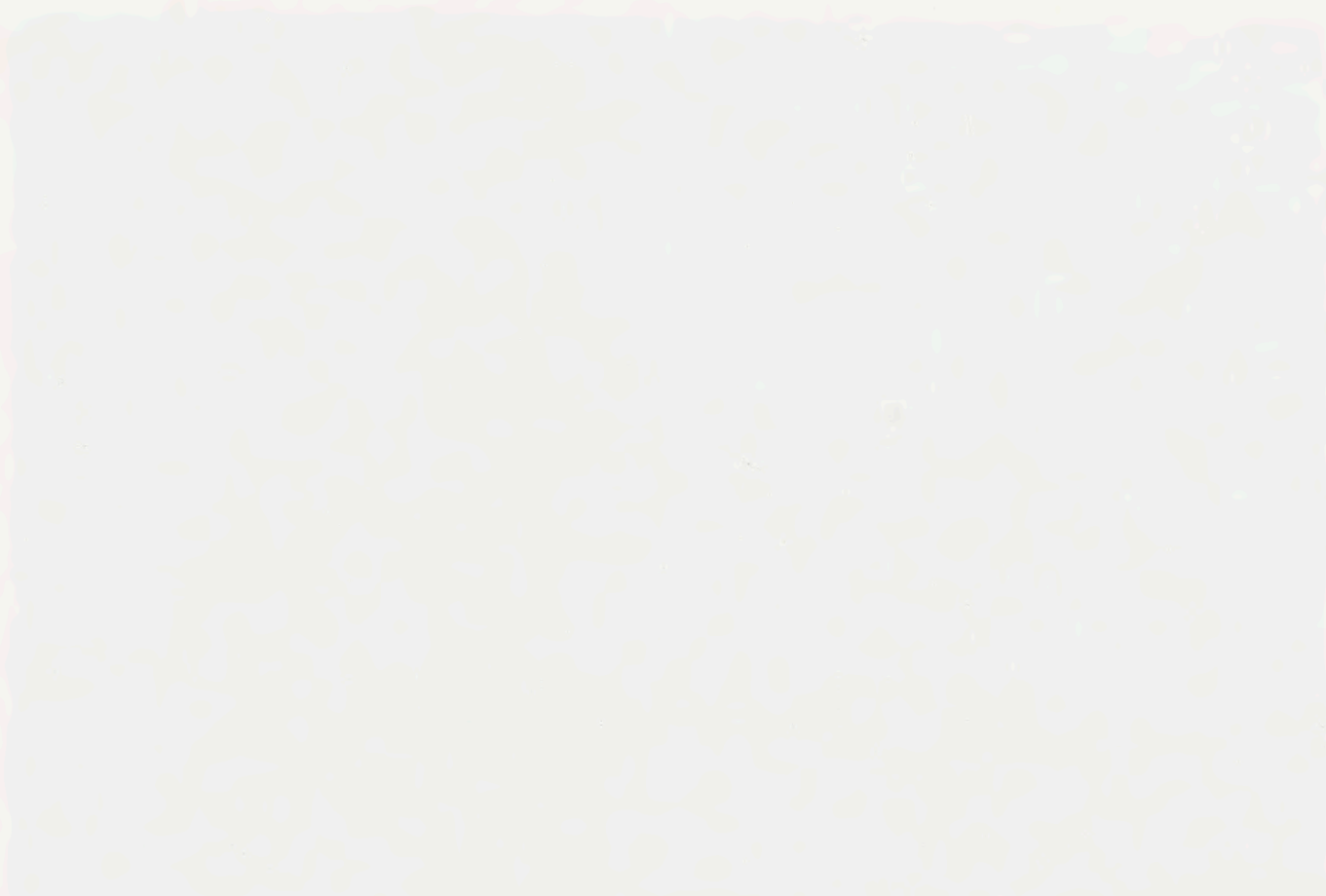
Mosier Island, Maine 1962





Cranberry Island, Maine 1966





Roxbury 1964



Roxbury 1967



Maine 1966

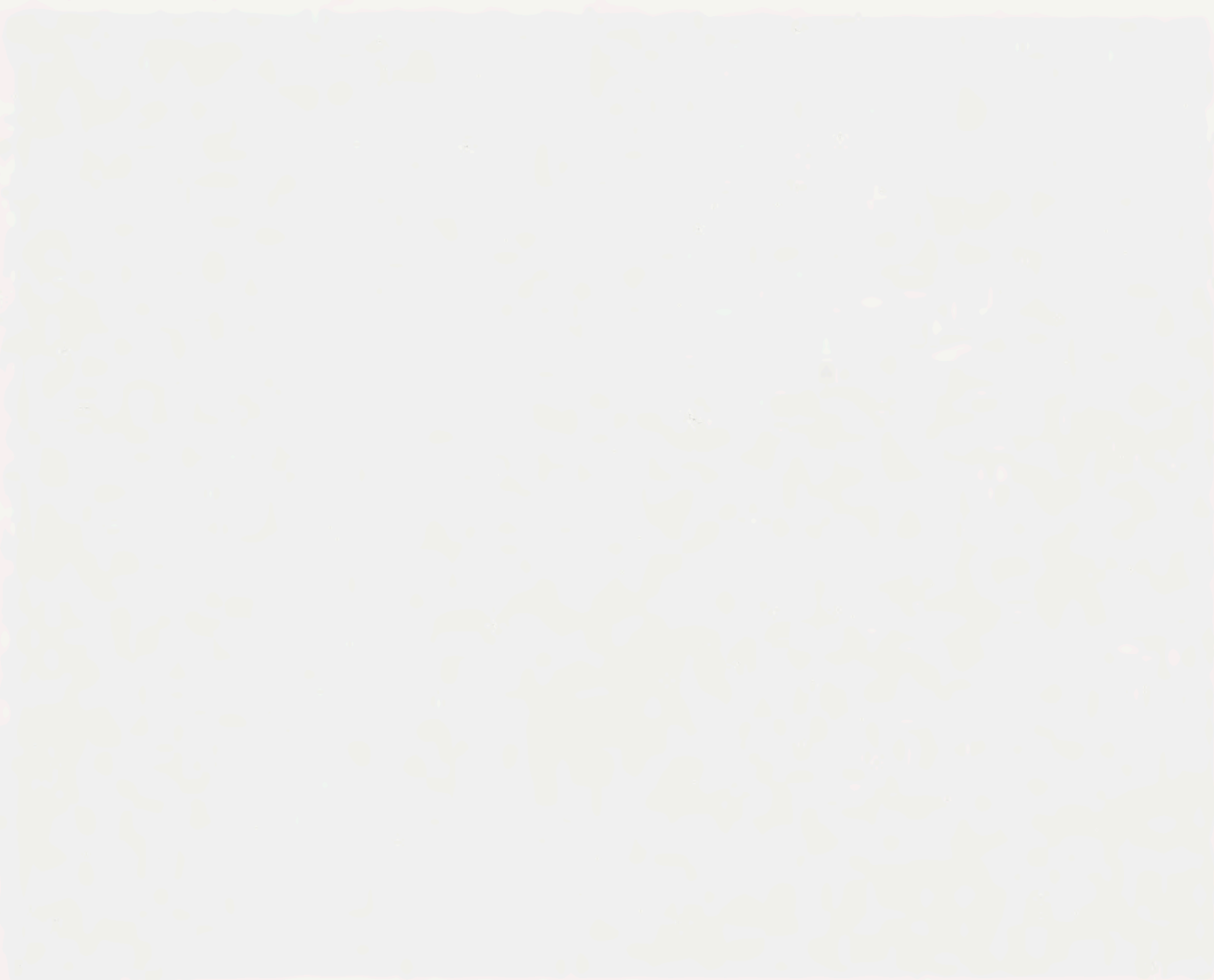


Isle au Haut 1972



Roxbury 1966





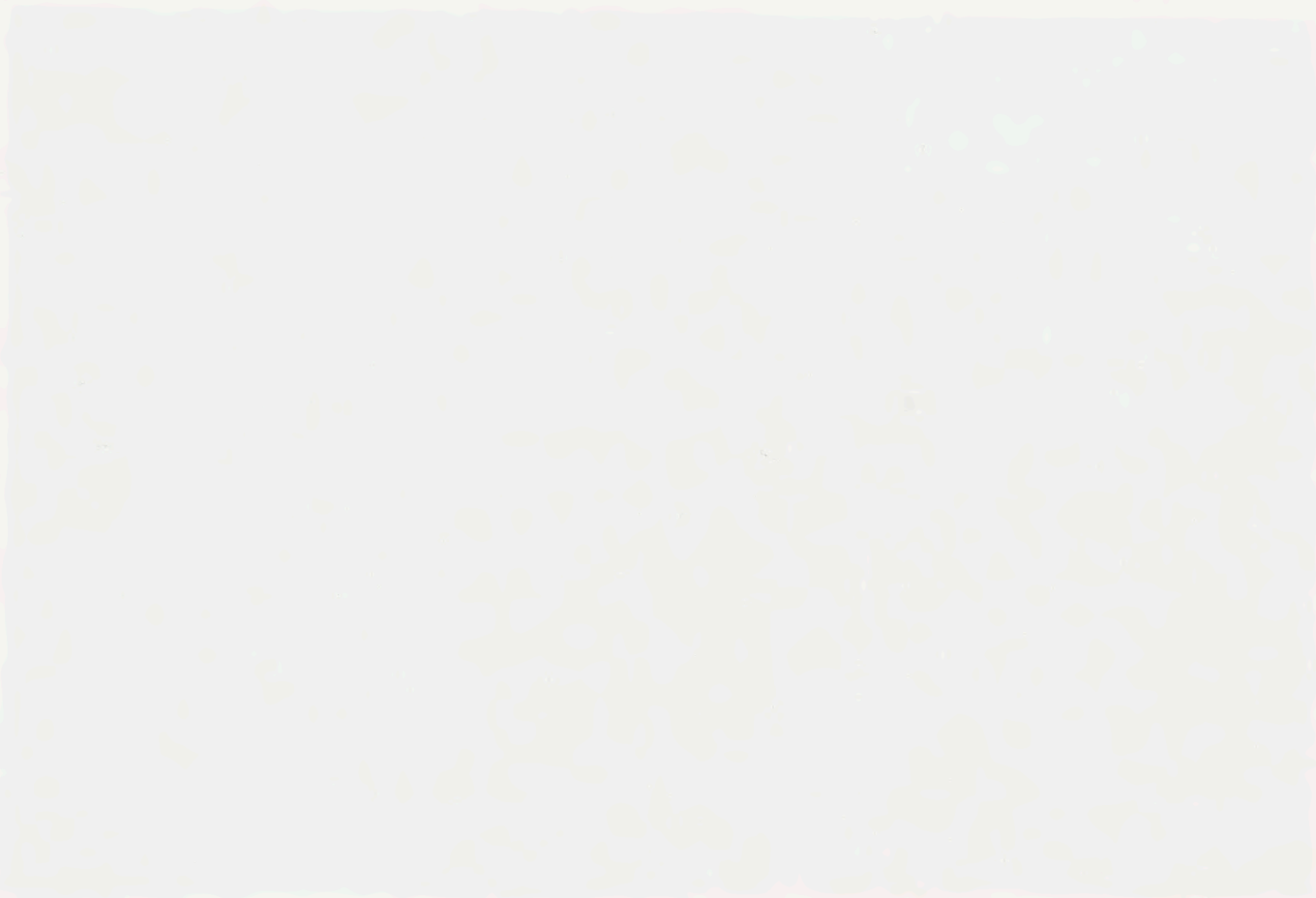
Cheeha-Combahee 1976





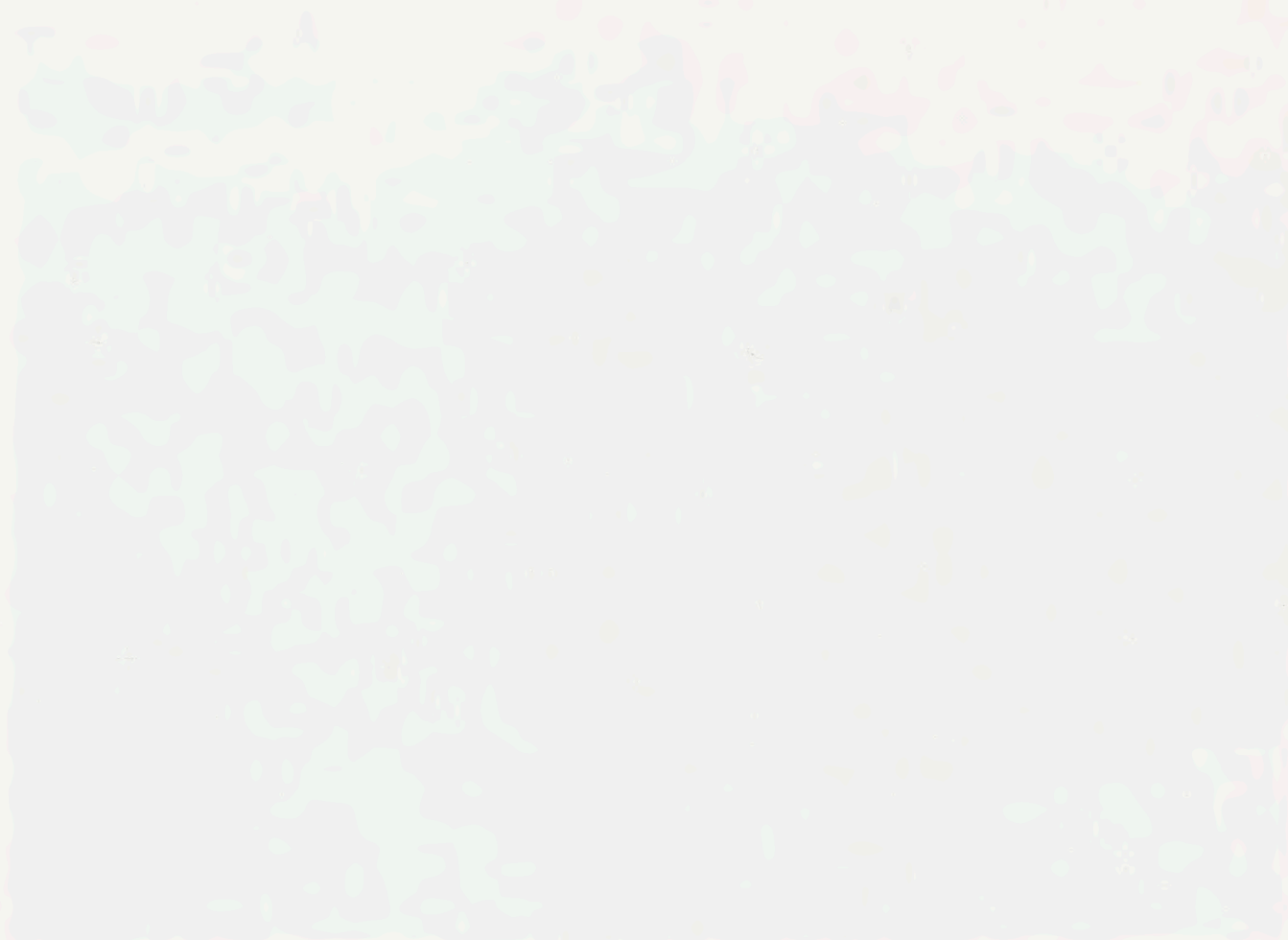
Roxbury 1967





Ireland 1973





Maine 1966





STATEMENT ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY

As for basic motivations in photography, I would say that there are certain moments in which I see parts of the world most clearly as themselves and as important to me. Photography is a direct response to these moments on the assumption that because of certain juxtapositions, presences or absences, light or, not the least important, my own state of mind, what is in front of me will never be exactly the same again. I could enjoy these moments and let them pass, holding them in a composite of experience, but at some point or another it became important to me to hold them in a more specific kind of commemoration. In other words, when I photograph a tree, I am photographing that tree at that time, not an implication of all trees at all times.

I believe that objective reality is infinitely complicated and infinitely rewarding, and therefore my primary concern is to make the clearest photographic image of what is in front of me. What is personal is my connection with this specific piece of the world as itself rather than for its use symbolically or as part of a picture.

All of this doesn't explain why I connect with certain parts of the world to the necessary exclusion of others. I'm not sure I know why, but, in general, any moment important enough to try to photograph has in it an element of familiarity seen again and again in new settings.

As for the process, ideally I would like to spend my time walking around as a free soul being completely open to what comes my way. However, the truth of the matter is that much of the time I set out specifically to photograph; that is, I go to a specific place (it is usually a place rather than a specific person or group of people—I'm a great map-reader) which for one reason or another is promising. Once there, I try to forget that I came for the purpose of photographing and leave myself open to respond first and then photograph as a result of that response. I have found that, almost inevitably, the more I succeed in doing this the better I use the camera.

I spend a good deal of time printing, because to me a photograph is only a photograph when it's a photograph—not when it's an unrealized potential in a badly printed negative, nor when it's a reproduction. Printing is an essential part of the process of transforming the experience into a photographic image. This involves fiddling with tonality, not for the sake

of richness as it applies to pieces of silver on paper, but as it applies to the memory of the surface of what was in front of me and as it applies to the unity of the image within the rectangle. The whole chain of effort starts with the experience of actuality at the moment of exposure, and this experience must be held all along the way if it is to be held at the end—as for me it must be.

As for aims, goals, etc., I suppose that what I want is a continuation of and a growth within the luxurious life of being able to photograph freely. I'm anxious that my pictures get out into the world in ways in which they can be best seen, and, being vain, I'd like to be recognized for them.

CHARLES PRATT

CHARLES PRATT (1926-1976)

- 1948 Graduated Yale University
- 1948-60 Broadway stage manager
- 1950's Studied photography with Lisette Model, Sid Grossman and David Vestal.
- 1960 Left the theater to become full-time photographer

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITIONS

- 1961 Image Gallery, New York
- 1966 Photography in the Fine Arts, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- 1967 Expo '67, Montreal
- 1968 New England Aquarium, Boston
- 1969 Pratt Institute, Brooklyn

ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 1959 Image Gallery (with Ann Treer)
- 1961 Image Gallery, New York
- 1962 Camera Infinity, New York
- 1965 Cober Gallery, New York
- 1966 Pratt Institute, New York
- 1969 Cober Gallery, New York
- 1974 Neikrug Gallery, New York
- 1980-81 Witkin Gallery, New York

COLLECTIONS

Museum of Modern Art, New York
Metropolitan Musuem of Art, New York
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C.
De Menil Collection, Houston, Texas
Various private collections

PUBLICATIONS: PERIODICALS

Fortune, special portfolio, May 1963
Infinity, special portfolio, July 1965
Popular Photography, Critic's choice by David Vestal, Dec. 1966
Life, special photography issue, Dec, 1967
U.S. Camera Annual, special portfolio 1967
Popular Photography Annual, special portfolio 1968
Woman, 1968, 1969
Audience, 1968, text and photographs
Popular Photography Annual, 1969, 1972
Natural History magazine, portfolio, March 1968
Audubon magazine, 1969, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974
Aperture, 1970
35mm Photography, "Thinking about the Landscape," text and photographs 1973

PUBLICATIONS: BOOKS

Photographs: *A Sense of Wonder*, by Rachel Carson, Harper and Row, 1965
At Night, by Phillip Ressner, Dutton, 1965
The Rocky Coast, by Rachel Carson, McCall, 1971
The Northeast Coast, by Rachel Carson, Time-Life Books, 1972
Photographing Nature, Time-Life Books, 1970
Photographing Children, Time-Life Books, 1971
The Craft of Photography, by David Vestal, Harper and Row, 1975

Text and
Photographs: *Here on the Island*, New York, Harper and Row, 1974
The Garden and the Wilderness. Horizon Press, 1980

